

Night Terrors

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Summary: The dragon riders are forced to take shelter from a storm in a cave, and to pass the time, they tell each other spooky stories. Little do they know that one of the stories is about to come true... (Two-parter, around two years before HTTYD2)

1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Flying through a storm was never fun.

A blinding flash of lightning split the sky as sheets of piercing rain and hail pelted the dragons and their riders. They were flying low over the ocean, which was roiling beneath them as waves the size of cliffs smashed into each other, sending salty spray high into the air and drenching the riders further. Hiccup would have preferred to fly higher, but the stormclouds were so low that they'd just end up flying through them, with zero visibility and an even higher likelihood of being struck by lightning.

"Any sign of land yet, bud?" he yelled, fighting to be heard over the fury of the storm.

Toothless shook his head fractionally, concentrating on staying aloft as the strong winds buffeted them from all sides. Not for the first time, Hiccup was glad of the hooks that tethered him to his friend's back; anyone who fell into that furious ocean wasn't coming out again.

All the dragons were exhausted and he wasn't sure whether the riders were going to drown or freeze to death first. The rain was so thick that it made it hard to breathe, and if his exposed skin hadn't already frozen solid, he was sure that the hail would be drawing blood. Somewhere far above them, the sun must still be shining, but it had forsaken them for the time being. They needed to find somewhere to put down, and soon.

A violent gust of wind caught them, causing Toothless to drop suddenly, and Hiccup held on for dear life as the dragon lurched downwards. He knew Toothless would never let him fall, but even the Night Fury was struggling to stay in control, and if they fell into the water then that would be the end of them.

Just as he thought Toothless had recovered, the spray from a huge wave caught them. Coughing and choking as the spray hit his face, Hiccup couldn't even tell whether he was breathing air or water anymore.

"Up, Toothless," he shouted desperately, once he'd caught his breath.

Toothless flapped his broad wings again and again, trying to gain some height, but Hiccup could feel his friend's fatigue. They stabilised at a safer altitude and Hiccup patted the dragon's head gratefully, trying to ignore the pain in his frozen fingers. It was then that he felt a burst of energy go through Toothless, who was peering off to the side. A moment later, the dragon tilted and turned in that direction.

Hiccup stared as hard as he could, but he could barely see more than a few feet in front of him. It wasn't until another burst of lightning lit up the world momentarily that he saw it: a jagged mountain of rock sticking out of the sea some way ahead of them. Checking behind to make sure the others were following, he thought he could still make out four vague dragon-like shapes cutting through the rain, so he patted Toothless again behind his ear plates. "Let's go."

The journey wasn't pleasant, but at least it was short. Up close, Hiccup got a better view of the small island, which looked too rocky and mountainous to land on. It was nothing but sheer cliffs and steep slopes of shattered stone — not a living thing in sight, not even a tree, and certainly nowhere to take shelter. "Take us around it, bud," he shouted, but his hopes were already sinking. "Maybe there's a better landing site on the other side."

The dragons circled the island — which was more of a single, brutal shard of rock stabbing up through the ocean really — but it looked just as unwelcoming from the other side. But Toothless's sight once again saved them as he dived down towards one of the tall cliffs. As they got closer, Hiccup realised they were heading towards a cleft in the rock: the mouth of a cave.

Toothless touched down with none of his usual grace; instead, he just splayed out on the ground, breathing heavily, as rivulets of rainwater and seawater trickled along the seams between his black scales. Hiccup pressed his cheek against the dragon's back and stroked his side with one arm. "Great work, bud. We made it." He unhooked his foot and stretched his stiff, frozen limbs with a groan of relief.

The other dragons were in little better shape as they arrived one by one. Stormfly arrived next, landing on her feet but staggering as she took a few further steps into the cave to leave room for the rest. Hookfang just ploughed along the ground, his broad wings scraping the sides of the cave, but managed to heave himself a bit deeper into the

cave after a moment. Meatlug arrived next, buffeting backwards and forwards in the hurricane wind outside, and bounced off one of the cave's walls and then the floor before coming to a stop.

Miraculously, Fishlegs had managed to stay in his saddle, but he promptly threw up as Meatlug lay on her side, panting. Belch and Barf were last to arrive and simply collapsed in the entrance of the cave, spilling the twins forward and coincidentally blocking most of the rain from entering the rest of the cavern.

"Ouch," Tuffnut said half-heartedly, as he sat up and grabbed his helmet from where it had rolled away.

"At least it's a bit drier," said Astrid, leaning against Stormfly. She sounded as exhausted as Hiccup felt, though in the darkness of the cave it was hard to see for sure.

"Any chance of some light, Toothless?" he asked before carefully sliding off the dragon's back. Toothless lifted his head to peer at him before shooting a jet of plasma into the floor nearby, causing it to glow a dull red and give off some welcome heat.

Hiccup scratched Toothless under the chin in gratitude and hobbled over to bask in the warmth, sensation slowly returning to his extremities. The cave was surprisingly spacious, he realised, although it probably felt smaller than it really was now that it was crammed full of dragons. It looked like a natural fissure in the dark grey rock, with a very high ceiling – so high that it was hidden in shadow, despite the light below. The walls were surprisingly smooth, perhaps worn down by the elements, but the floor was uneven and dotted with loose rocks and pebbles.

The back of the cave tapered into gloomy darkness, heading further back into the mountain, so he assumed the cave was relatively deep; he thought about checking to see how far back it went, but then shrugged – all he really cared about was that it kept out most of the wet and cold. It was only late afternoon but the storm was so fierce and so thick that it was nearly as dark as night outside. With the wind howling past the cave's mouth, the hail shooting against the mountainside, and the fierce waves crashing into the cliff beneath them, it wasn't exactly quiet, but at least they could hear themselves think now. "Everyone okay?" he asked.

"I'm so wet I think my bones are waterlogged," Snotlout complained as he poured water out of one of his boots.

Fishlegs, who looked a bit blue, nodded. "Once I thaw out at least."

"I can hear water sloshing around in my brain," Ruffnut added, tilting her head side to side as she sat next to Barf.

Astrid nodded back at him too. "Better now that we're out of that storm." She looked up to the roof of the cave, then down into the darker depths of it. "Where are we, anyway? I didn't recognise this island."

"Neither did I," Hiccup admitted, and that was saying something; he and Toothless had explored the area around Berk pretty well, and they'd visited every island along the way. "But it's only a small island; maybe we've just missed it until now?"

"If so, I think we're the first Vikings ever to set foot here," Fishlegs said. He'd moved to sit next to the glowing rock and was warming his hands in its heat. "Erik the Explorer was said to have sailed to every island within hundreds of miles of Berk, and this one wasn't on his charts."

"I don't care as long as I don't have to go out into that storm again," Snotlout said, joining him. "We should have just stayed on Berk."

Privately, Hiccup wondered if he was right. When Mulch and Bucket's fishing boat hadn't returned on schedule despite the storm that Gothi had indicated was coming, the dragon riders had gone out to search for it. But none of them had expected the storm to grow so rapidly or so soon; Hiccup could only hope that Mulch and Bucket had made it to safety before it had got this bad. Bucket was usually first to sense an oncoming storm anyway, so they'd probably taken shelter at some other island by now.

"You okay, Toothless?" he asked quietly, moving around to crouch down in front of Toothless and place a hand on his nose. The dragon opened a sleepy eye and made a couple of reassuring noises that Hiccup interpreted as a yes. "Get some rest then, bud," Hiccup said, smiling at his friend and scratching him on his neck. "You deserve it for getting us through that storm."

"We'll just have to wait out the storm here," Astrid said, unhooking her satchel from Stormfly's back and bringing it over to the heated rock. "Hopefully it'll blow itself out soon."

* * *

><p>Unfortunately, the storm seemed to have other ideas. They built a proper fire pit, getting the dragons to heat up the rocks to provide light and warmth, and then settled around it to rest. The riders had dried out and warmed up after an hour or so, and their dragons looked somewhat perkier by then, but the vicious wind just kept on blowing and the piercing hail just kept on falling. They'd spent another half hour having something to eat, but then they'd run out of things to do. By the time the storm had raged on for another couple of hours, everyone was bored out of their minds.</p>

Ruff and Tuff had been shouting and arguing for the past half an hour, interspersed with occasional bouts of beating each other up; Astrid was fending off Snotlout's increasingly pathetic attempts at flirting with her, on the verge of seriously losing her temper; and Fishlegs was somehow nearly asleep despite the noise, resting against Meatlug's side. Even the dragons were getting restless, with Barf and Belch bickering as much as their owners and Hookfang peering almost eagerly into the downpour outside.

They needed something to occupy themselves, Hiccup knew. Toothless nudged him with his head, encouraging him to do something, so Hiccup moved towards the centre of the cave and said, loudly, "Can everyone just shut up for a moment?"

Amazingly, it worked, with even the twins falling silent. "We're going to be stuck here a while longer," Hiccup said, more quietly now that everyone was listening, "so we might as well try and fill the

time with something fun." Then he looked at the twins' bruises and saw the death-glare Astrid was giving Snotlout. "Or at least non-violent."

Fishlegs yawned and looked at him hopefully. "Like what?"

"A wrestling contest!" Tuff shouted. "Yeah, I'll take you all on. Wait until you feel the mighty grip of my â€" "

"We don't want to know, Tuffnut," Astrid shot back, rolling her eyes. "And I doubt that's what Hiccup had in mind."

Actually, Hiccup was hoping someone else would come up with an idea for once, but as he looked around and saw them all staring at him expectantly, he sighed and started thinking quickly. He was as restless as the others, but they hadn't brought much with them beyond a little food and some medical supplies. He wasn't very fond of the wrestling match idea either, obviously. Staring at the fire pit in the centre of the cave, he was reminded of the old days during dragon training and how some nights they'd sit around a fire to eat. "Well, how about we tell each other some stories, just like Gobber used to do while he was training us?"

Snotlout looked at him, mouth curling in disdain. "Pfft. Stories? That's your big idea?"

"Give me wrestling any day," Ruff said, moving to grab her brother in a headlock.

Hiccup knew he was on the verge of losing them again. "Even... ghost stories?" he asked. "It is a dark and stormy night, after all."

"Ghost stories?" Fishlegs said, no longer looking so hopeful.

"Sure," Hiccup said, warming slightly to his topic now. He looked back at Toothless, who had perked up, and pointed at the fire pit they'd made; it was cooling down quickly, barely giving off any light now. "Care to do the honours again, Toothless?"

The Night Fury obliged, shooting another gentle plasma jet into the pile of rocks and causing it to glow a warm orange. The light, while dim, was enough to cast tall shadows against the walls of the cave, and Hiccup took full advantage of it by standing closer and holding his hands out like claws, giving his shadow a more threatening silhouette. "There are many tales of terror and spirits," he said in his best ghostly voice. "Stories of monsters and beasts that prey upon foolish Vikings." He smiled as an idea came to mind. "How many of you have heard the fearsome tale of the Troll Statue?" Given that Hiccup was making up the story on the spot, it was unlikely to be many of them...

A sarcastic grin appeared on Astrid's face. "Trolls? Really, Hiccup?"

Blushing slightly, Hiccup shrugged. "I am something of an expert on trolls, after all."

"Yeah, after all that time you spent running around the woods looking

for them," Snotlout said in a withering tone of voice. But Hiccup at least had his attention now, and Ruffnut had even released him from her headlock.

"But you know why I couldn't find them, right, Snotlout?" Hiccup felt a sly smile spread across his face. "They disguise themselves as rocks, you know. You just ask Gothi. The really big ones are the size of mountains and get covered with grass and trees and fall asleep for centuries, and you'd never know that you were walking up a troll's arm, or on top of its head." He gestured around at the damp cave they were in. "For all we know, we're taking shelter in a troll's ear right now."

"Pfft, yeah, right," Ruffnut said. "Tuff's girlish screams would have woken it up by now." She punched Tuffnut solidly on the arm, eliciting just such a scream. "See?"

"Ow! That is very much not girlish," Tuffnut, punching her back.
"It's a very manly scream."

"Anyway..." Hiccup said, trying to redirect them back to the story. "I searched and searched, and I think I found some rocks that might have been trolls, but I could never wake them up, and I never saw one walking about. But Gobber once told me about a man who did" Old Gragar the Stonemason."

Fishlegs looked baffled. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter, Fishlegs," Astrid said, rolling her eyes. She'd relaxed a bit, leaning back on her arms by the fire with her legs crossed, and was watching him with amusement. "Just listen."

Hiccup sent her a look of silent thanks; at least she'd cottoned on to the plan. "He lived on Berk many years ago," he said. "Gragar used to love roaming the island for interesting shaped rocks to carve into statues. It was Gragar who apparently carved the stone Vikings that guard the harbour. Surprised you don't remember that, Fishlegs."

"Oh, that Gragar," Fishlegs said in a rather unconvincing tone.
"Yeah... I know the one."

"Well, Gragar was determined to make the most perfect statue anyone had ever seen, one that would impress even the gods. And one day, Gragar found an ideal piece of rock" just the right size and shape for a perfect statue of a valkyrie." Hiccup was definitely warming to his theme and he sat down beside the fire pit with the others. Even the dragons seemed to be following the tale, although Meatlug appeared to have fallen asleep. "He dragged it back to his workshop and began working on it, secretly, wanting to surprise the whole village. Even his wife didn't know what he was working on."

He had their attention now. Fishlegs and Snotlout were gazing at him with interest, the twins were surreptitiously poking any troll-sized rocks around them, and even Astrid seemed to be enjoying the story.

"Night after night he'd sneak into his workshop and work on it, chiselling a bit here, a bit there, all according to the image he had in his head. And night after night, the valkyrie statue would slowly

take shape." Hiccup mimed working with a hammer and chisel, adopting an expression of great concentration. "It took him weeks, but finally it was finished. Gragar was a master craftsman, and the valkyrie statue looked almost lifelike â€“ except made of stone, of course. So that night, after his wife had gone to sleep, he carried the statue into his house to surprise her in the morning."

"I'll bet it was a surprise, all right," Snotlout muttered.

Hiccup smiled at him. "It was indeed. But not in the way he intended. Because the rock was really a troll, and when Gragar woke up the next morning, he found his wife was gone and the statue was gone too. All that remained was some bloody scratches where the statue had been."

Fishlegs glanced around uneasily. "What happened then?"

"Well, nothing at first. Gragar didn't understand what had happened â€“ he figured his wife had hated the statue and had taken it away. Only as the days passed and there was still no sign of her did he begin to worry; he thought perhaps a dragon had taken her in the night, but why would the dragon take a statue too?" He shrugged. "They sent out search parties, of course, but never found anything. Just rocks in the forest. After that, Gragar stopped his stonecarving; he couldn't bear to carve something new after his wife had disappeared. But then he got a visit from his cousin, who thanked him for gifting them with such a beautiful valkyrie statue." Hiccup looked around the fire, staring at each of his friends one by one, deliberately dragging out the pause. Then, in a hushed voice, he continued: "But Gragar just said that he hadn't given them any such statue, that he hadn't done any stonecarving in days."

Hiccup clapped his hands, making them all jump. "Something awful must have happened, Gragar knew. He and his cousin rushed over to the other house only to find it deserted, with just some scratches in the floor to show anything had happened. It was only then that Gragar began to realise he'd made a terrible mistake."

"No kidding," Tuffnut said. "Who'd want to be a stonemason? Like, it's got to be the most boring job ever, right?"

Ruffnut smacked him on the helmet with a rock. "Shut up."

"Over the next few days, more and more people reported seeing the statue, and more and more people went missing without a trace," Hiccup said. "By the end of the week, every statue in Berk had been smashed to pieces, just in case. And for a while, they thought that had done the trick." Hiccup paused and held his hands out towards the warmth, rubbing them together, enjoying the way the others leaned forwards eagerly to hear the ending.

Surprisingly, Astrid's patience broke first. "And?"

"Well, everyone had blamed Gragar for the cursed statue. They thought he'd put some kind of spell on it, or offended the gods somehow by making it, so they all avoided him â€“ especially those who had lost someone. Nobody trusted him anymore. If it hadn't been for his pride in trying to make the most perfect statue, all those people would still be around."

"So instead Gragar spent his days searching the forest, looking for his wife, always hoping she was still alive somewhere. He went on like that for months, until one day he just didn't come back," Hiccup said gravely. "It was the last anyone ever saw of him, and nobody wanted to risk going to look for him. The story goes that he'd eventually found the statue, just waiting for him in the forest, and it took away him like all the others" finally repaying its creator." Then he picked up a nearby rock, twice the size of his fist, and held it out in front of him. "But ever since then, people have occasionally seen a mysterious, lifelike valkyrie statue where there shouldn't be one. They might see it and think nothing of it, only to turn back and see that it's gone. And sometimes, those people disappear too." He tossed the rock into the fire pit and stared at it as it began to warm and glow red. "So be careful" you never know which rock might really be a troll."

There was a long moment of silence, with all the others staring at the glowing rock, and then Ruff and Tuff began flinging any nearby rocks they could find into the fire pit too.

"Quick! Get rid of them all!" Ruffnut yelled, trying to kick away a particularly big stone only to stub her toe.

Snotlout also joined in, throwing a couple of rocks away, one of which bounced off the floor and hit Hookfang on the snout. The Monstrous Nightmare reared up in surprise and lit its scales on fire, lighting up the cave as though the sun had fallen to earth.

"Whoa, whoa, calm down!" Hiccup shouted, getting to his feet and holding out his hands in a placating manner. "There aren't any trolls in here."

"How can you be sure?" Fishlegs said, mouth quivering as he pushed up against Meatlug's sleeping body.

"I'm the troll expert, remember?" Hiccup said, giving Fishlegs a wry smile. "Besides, dragons can smell trolls. Everyone knows that, right? If there were any trolls in here, Toothless would have found them already." He turned around to face Toothless, who nodded and gave a confident growl. "See?"

That appeared to calm them all down, and Hookfang settled down and let his flames go out, though Hiccup couldn't help but notice how Astrid was trying to smother laughter with one hand. "Very good story, Hiccup," she said with a broad grin.

"Glad you liked it," Hiccup said, sitting down again. He glanced outside the mouth of the cave and sighed at the continuing fury of the storm. "Looks like we've still got more time to kill, though. So, who's next?"

Gradually, they all came back and sat down, though Tuffnut was still sending suspicious glares at every rock he could see.

"I-I've got a story," Fishlegs said, raising a hand tentatively.

"Go ahead, Fishlegs," Hiccup said, leaning backwards on his arms and waiting expectantly. This was going better than he expected; well, except for the bit where everyone started throwing random rocks around.

Fishlegs lowered his hand, but didn't speak immediately; instead he gazed into the glowing rocks for a few moments, allowing the raging noise of the storm outside to fill the cave instead. "It was on a stormy night much like this one," he began, "that Seabert the Salty went missing."

Hiccup looked over to where Toothless lay coiled nearby, a content yellow eye peering back at him, and smiled. Maybe this trip might even turn out to be fun in the end.

"Seabert was a sea raider, back before there were Outcasts, and he used to sail around the archipelago to steal, pillage, and loot whatever he could," Fishlegs explained, his voice low. They had to concentrate to hear him above the wind. "Seabert was the scourge of the Seven Isles, the swashbuckler of the salty sea, the..." and then he faltered.

"Scoundrel of the southern coasts?" Hiccup suggested.

Fishlegs smiled back at him gratefully. "Exactly. Seabert was a master swordsman, despite having a hook for a hand. He had a mighty ship with black sails, the *Corsair*, and a crew of vicious cut-throats. No ship could run from them, and if there was even a rumour that the *Corsair* was in nearby waters, nobody would put to sea at all."

"Sounds cool, I like him already," Snotlout said.

"No ship ever defeated him, and even when whole fleets were sent to track down the *Corsair*, Seabert either avoided them or crushed them. Seabert was so successful that he bragged that even the gods themselves couldn't stop him."

"But one day, Seabert and the *Corsair* just... disappeared," Fishlegs continued, making a vanishing gesture with his hands. "They'd just raided a village on a nearby island and were sailing away with their booty when a mysterious fog began to roll in, one that lay heavy on the seas and seemed almost to smother the waves themselves."

Hiccup had to admit, Fishlegs was pretty good at telling stories. He half wondered whether Fishlegs was really making it up or whether it was a real tale; knowing Fishlegs, it could well be something he'd seen in a book at some point.

"And the fog just swallowed them up. There were no more raids, and nobody saw Seabert ever again..."

Ruffnut snorted. "Some story then."

"...alive," Fishlegs said, frowning at her. "But that doesn't mean they never saw him or his ship again." He adopted a far-away expression and gestured outside. "It started when people began to find ships just abandoned at sea, perfectly intact, even with the sails still up â€ just nobody aboard. The first time, they thought it might have been a storm. Then, when more and more ships were discovered, they wondered whether it was some kind of new dragon or even some kind of sea monster. Of course, being Vikings, they started to send out warships to track down the cause."

Fishlegs shrugged. "Most of them came back empty handed. A few never came back at all, their ships found abandoned, just like the rest. Everyone kept thinking it was just a kind of dragon attack until one day someone survived."

"Survived the dragon attack?" Tuffnut asked in confusion. "Wait, I thought you were talking about a pirate? Or is this a pirate dragon? Because that would be awesome."

"There was no dragon," Fishlegs explained quietly. "The survivor was young, no older than us, and he'd escaped by jumping overboard. He washed up ashore a day later, having gone mad with fear. He just kept babbling about Seabert the Salty, how the Corsair had appeared out of nowhere and ghost pirates had attacked them."

"It went on for years, claiming only a few boats each year, but nobody knew whether it would be their turn to disappear or not. Eventually, people realised it happened only on nights with a full moon. First, the fog would start to appear, and then the wind would drop. Sailors would take up the oars if they knew what was good for them, but often even that wasn't enough to save them. Because next they'd see a ghostly ship cutting through the fog, black sails still billowing despite there being no wind."

Snotlout's mouth was hanging open, Hiccup noticed idly. Then he saw that Stormfly, sat behind Astrid, seemed on edge and was ruffling her wings nervously. Were even the dragons starting to feel the tense atmosphere? That heavy silence despite the howling wind and driving rain of the storm roaring against the side of the mountain?

He shivered and hunched forward again, checking to make sure Toothless was still behind him and keeping an eye out.

"Usually there were no survivors," Fishlegs went on. "Rescue parties would just find empty ships, crews missing, sometimes abandoned mid-meal. The sailors were never found, but the stories spread because occasionally people would escape by hiding, or swimming away. Those that survived would report how the ghostly ship would draw up beside them, and then skeletal Vikings would board and take everyone away. Swords and axes were useless against them, and the catapults just fired straight through the Corsair, like it wasn't really there at all." Fishlegs paused dramatically. "Their leader had a hook for a hand, and that's how they knew it was Seabert the Salty, still roaming the seas after all this time."

Hiccup couldn't help himself and he asked, "But Fishlegs â€“ where did all the missing people go?"

Fishlegs looked back at him sadly. "That's the scariest thing, Hiccup â€“ nobody knows. They just... vanished."

To Hiccup's surprise, Astrid was nodding slowly. "I've heard that story from my grandfather," she said. "He told me that Seabert had been taken by RÃ³n, the goddess of the sea, and that Seabert would hunt down those who didn't pay tribute to the sea before setting out on their voyages." She looked around at them all, eyes wide, and added, "It was meant to be a deal: if he collected enough souls, he and his crew would be released."

Okay, so maybe telling ghost stories wasn't the best idea ever, Hiccup reflected, as he stared uneasily out of the cave into the night. At least it wasn't foggy, though this high up the story mountainside, all he could see was clouds and occasional flashes of lightning.

"Who's next?" Tuffnut said, uncharacteristically solemn.

"My dad used to tell me a story about the Nightcrawlers," Snotlout said slowly, as if unsure whether he really wanted to tell the story or not. "He said it was a true story, though I don't know if I ever believed him."

"Go on, Snotlout," Hiccup encouraged him.

"It started when people began to disappear from Berk." Snotlout took off his helmet and placed it by his feet, then rubbed the back of his head tiredly. "Dad used to say that if I didn't behave when I was a kid, the Nightcrawlers would come and take me away."

For a moment — just a moment — Hiccup felt sorry for the other Viking.

"But in the story, it wasn't just misbehaving kids. It wasn't even just kids, though there were some. It was anyone. People would just go to sleep one night and then the next morning they were gone." Snotlout looked at Hiccup. "Often scrawny runts like Hiccup, who couldn't fight back so well, but not always."

Well, there went any sympathy Hiccup had momentarily felt.

But Snotlout just went on with his tale. "There was never any sign of what had happened to them, and usually the doors were still locked. No way in or out."

"Was it dragons?" Fishlegs asked. "They could just fly in the window."

"Sure, but why would they?" Snotlout shrugged. "Back then, dragons were more interested in stealing sheep and burning down the village. No need to kidnap Vikings." He paused as a peal of thunder rumbled through the cave, then said, "The only clue was a sound, a bit like this." And he started making gentle tapping noises on the ground, like some animal walking very quickly but very quietly. "Some people would hear it at night, often on the roof of their house. Sometimes on the walls. Sometimes underneath them." He stopped talking, but kept making the sound, making it louder and louder.

Fishlegs squeaked. "Okay, okay, we get it," he said, wrapping his arms around his knees and shaking slightly.

"Nobody knew what was happening to these people, but my dad finally found a clue: a trail of blood. One of the missing people must have been bleeding as they got taken away." Snotlout was grinning now, enjoying the effect his tale was having on the others. He made the tapping noise again, and even Hiccup shifted uneasily. "So my dad got his friends together — he wasn't much older than we are at the time — and went hunting to see what happened to them."

Tuffnut sneezed, making them all jump. "Sorry," he said. "I think I

picked up a cold."

"Oh, great." Ruffnut shuffled away from him. "Just make sure you don't give it to any of us."

Snotlout glared at them until they shut up. "So as I was saying! My dad and his friends followed the trail into the forest, making their way to a cave deep in the trees, somewhere near the centre of Berk. It was a large cave, dark, and at first they hesitated. They didn't know what was in there, after all."

Something about this tale was beginning to ring bells for Hiccup. Maybe he'd heard it too once?

"But they were Vikings, so after preparing some torches, they went in," Snotlout said proudly. "And they went deeper into the cave, splitting up when the cave branched, until it was just my dad and one other who were exploring this one particular part."

"It was then that they found the webs."

"Webs?" Astrid asked, raising her eyebrows. "Like spiders?"

"Think bigger," Snotlout said. "Much bigger. Like ropes. Strands of web as big as your fingers. They cut their way through, but only slowly; the webs were sticky and hard to cut, even with the sharpest swords." He got to his feet and began to act out the motions dramatically, waving his arms around as if wielding a sword. "Hack and slash, slash and hack, with a bit more slashing thrown in for good measure."

Astrid rolled her eyes. "We get the picture, Snotlout."

"Then they began to hear the sound," Snotlout said, crouching down and tapping again, louder and louder. "And as they got deeper into the cave, they realised something was watching them. There were eyes in the walls, and on the floor, and on the ceiling." He stood up again and walked over to Hookfang, stroking him gently on the snout. "Eyes everywhere. And when they brought the torch closer, they found out what they belonged to: the Nightcrawlers." He turned back to the others and returned to the fire pit, sitting down again. "Creatures like you've never seen before. Big as big as yaks. Six legs, but the front two were more like arms. And only two eyes, big ones, on the front of the head, which had a big mouth and really sharp fangs, as sharp as a dragon's. Long antenna, like ants. And big, fat, hairy bodies, all bristly and slimy."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tuffnut said, and he did look a little green.

Ruffnut plucked his helmet off and held it upside down under his chin. "Just make sure you don't get any on me," she said, disgusted.

"Ah, I think I can hold it," Tuffnut said, nudging the helmet out of the way, although he still looked a bit queasy.

"What happened next?" Hiccup asked, curious despite himself. He wondered if he'd heard a similar tale from Gobber before; it definitely sounded familiar.

"My dad and his friend hacked a few to pieces, but there were just too many. They had to run back out of the cave, chased all the way by the Nightcrawlers. Some of the others met up with them at the entrance, and some never made it that far, but they held the mouth of the cave, stopping any more from getting past." Snotlout grinned smugly. "My dad said he'd never seen so many severed limbs before. The Nightcrawlers retreated, but it wasn't over yet.

"They returned to the village for reinforcements and more torches, then they began to search the caves. It turned out they were infested with Nightcrawlers; a whole nest of them, in fact. There were bones everywhere in the deepest caverns; yaks, sheep, birds, humanâ€¦ even dragons. And webbing was everywhere too, everything sticky. They had to burn through a lot of it with the torches, though it only kind of melted, and didn't burn very well."

"Did they find the missing villagers?" Fishlegs asked, looking around at the walls as if expecting to see eyes peering back at them.

"Some of them," Snotlout admitted. "Wrapped up in webbing and unable to move. The Nightcrawlers had bitten them and paralysed them. That was the worst part: if they got you, you were just helpless. They wouldn't kill you immediately; instead they'd wrap you up, and once you got tired of struggling, then they'd eat you." He shuddered, looking down at the rocky ground, and Hiccup realised just how much this story must have affected Snotlout as a boy. Hiccup was glad that his father had enough sense not to have told him stories like this as a child. Gobber, on the other hand...

"The other villagers must have been eaten already. Maybe that's where some of the bones came from. But my dad wanted to make sure no more villagers were ever taken, so he got everyone to build fires in all of the caves. He wanted to burn the nest out." Snotlout coughed in embarrassment and rubbed the back of his head again. "That just seemed to make them mad, though, and a really big one â€" the queen maybe â€" came out from the deepest parts of the nest. It was the size of a dragon and it chased them all right out of the cave, so they decided to block up the mouth of the cave so at least the Nightcrawlers would be trapped in there."

He mimed rocks falling with his hands and made a rumbling noise. "They pulled down the mountainside in a rockslide, blocking the entrance, and it seemed to work â€" there were no more missing villagers for ages. But according to my dad, sometimes you'd still hear the tapping noise â€" and again he made the sound to illustrate, "â€" of the Nightcrawlers looking for more easy prey to eat."

There was a long moment of silence when Snotlout finished his story. The fire pit was dimmer now, cooling down again, and the young Vikings were all hunched up around its remaining warmth, hoping that its fading light would keep away their fears. There was a resounding silence in the cave, despite the roar of the stormy sea outside, that made Hiccup shiver. Nobody was willing to break it by speaking.

Eventually, because he couldn't bear it any more, Hiccup got awkwardly to his feet and wandered past Barf and Belch to the cave's mouth. It was now so dark that he could barely even see the waves

smashing against the cliffs below, and judging by the way the icy rain fell like angry needles on his skin, the storm was far from over yet.

"I think we could do with a bit more light," he said, turning round. "We're still going to be here a while yet."

Most of the others were on their feet again by now too, and Fishlegs went and patted Meatlug gently behind the ears. "Your turn, girl," he said, and the Gronckle obligingly vomited some superheated rocks into the fire pit, which began to heat up the others around it and sent new shadows flickering against the shiny walls of the cave. The silhouettes of the dragons were quite intimidating, even though the dragons themselves were mostly curled up in a circle around their riders, dozing away.

Tuffnut was pacing about nervously. "Can't we just go anyway?" he asked. "Storm doesn't look quite as bad, and I'm getting bored of stories now."

"Still bad enough, and the dragons are tired," Hiccup replied, moving to check on Toothless, who opened a sleepy eye to peer at him. "Why don't you tell us one next, Tuff?" It was clear that everyone was on edge now, and perhaps something a bit more comical â€“ which, knowing Tuffnut, was exactly what they'd get â€“ would help warm up the frozen atmosphere that had settled in the cave.

"Once upon a time, an evil dragon attacked Berk, but the mighty hero called Tuffnut vanquished it and all the girls wanted to marry him and he lived happily ever after. The end." Tuffnut adopted a heroic pose, head up, fist in the air, and held it until Ruffnut shoved him and he tripped over a rock. "Ow!"

"Any other stories?" Hiccup asked, suppressing a sigh. He sat down again, taking the weight off his aching left leg, and held up his hands to warm them in the renewed heat of the fire pit. This was going to be a long, long night.

"I've got one," Ruffnut said, now sitting on top of her struggling brother and periodically mashing his head down into the ground. "From when we were kids."

Astrid had her arms folded and was tapping her foot as she glared at the twins. "Maybe you ought to let Tuffnut go, or he'll only interrupt."

Reluctantly, Ruffnut released her brother, who rolled away with a disgruntled expression. "Better be a good story, or I'm going to get you back for that," he warned.

"When Tuff and me were just kids, we saw a huge black dog out in the forest," Ruff said. She crossed her legs, pulled out a knife, and proceeded to start picking at her nails as she spoke, seemingly uninterested in her own story. "And I mean huge, like, as big as Meatlug."

Fishlegs was frowning. "There are no dogs that big. Was it a wolf?"

"Doesn't matter," Ruffnut said, still talking as if she was

describing a day spent chopping wood. "It was big, black, and dog-shaped. We only caught a glimpse of it once, and it was just stood there, staring at us. We didn't hang around to find out more."

"I remember that." Tuffnut was looking at her with an unusually serious expression on his face. "I thought we decided never to talk about it."

"Well, it's better than your story." Ruffnut shrugged and continued. "We ran back to the village. We were about nine or ten and had never seen anything like that. The first person we bumped into was Gobber, and we told him all about the big black dog in the woods." She paused in her nail-picking and although she was still staring at the fire pit, Hiccup got the feeling that she was seeing something different. "You should have seen the look on his face. It terrified us more than the dog had ever done."

"He grabbed us by the hands and dragged us off to see Gothi without saying a word," Tuffnut said, picking up the story. He was staring off into the shadows, away from the others, and his voice was low and almost sullen. "We kept asking him what was wrong, but he wouldn't answer."

"When we got to Gothi's hut, he told her that we'd seen the Black Shug." Ruffnut was just idly spinning the knife around in her hands now. "When we asked what that was, he just said it was an omen."

"It's more than that," Fishlegs said in a quavering tone. "I read about it once, in the book of omens. It's a sign of impending death. If you see it, it means you're going to die that day."

"Well, obviously they didn't," Astrid said, gesturing at the twins.

Snotlout laughed. "Not that we'd miss them." But his laughter died away quickly when he realised nobody else had joined in. "Only kidding," he added uncomfortably.

"Gothi painted our faces with black and green and drew some runes on a piece of wood that she burned," Tuffnut said, not rising to the bait for once. "Then she scribbled something on the sand and Gobber translated it, saying that we had to make an offering to Odin or the big black dog would come in the night and eat our souls."

"What sort of offering?" Hiccup asked softly. He'd never seen the twins like this.

Ruffnut flicked her eyes up to meet his. "A live one."

Hiccup looked away, feeling slightly stunned.

"So we went back into the forest," Ruffnut said, "and had to hunt something we could use as an offering. Gobber told us that whatever it was, we had to offer its soul to Odin in exchange for ours, and hope that it would satisfy the Black Shug."

Tuffnut grunted with remembered irritation. "It was like the forest was empty of animals that day. Nothing. Zilch. Nada. The streams were

empty, the birds all flown away, and even the worms seem to be hiding. But in the end we came across a wounded boar, hiding in a bush."

"You know, I'm not really sure I want to hear the end of this story," Hiccup admitted. He'd never expected the twins to start telling such a personal story -- a real story, unlike his daft tale about the troll statue.

"Too late now," Ruffnut said, still with that same bored tone of voice, like this had all happened to someone else. "Besides, there isn't much more. We chased the boar down when it tried to run. It didn't get far. After that, we made an offering of the boar to Odin, like Gobber had told us, and then waited."

"We heard it first," Tuffnut took over. He flicked another pebble into the fire pit and cleared his throat. "The forest was so quiet that we heard the rustling of the bushes, like it was stalking us. Then we saw its red eyes, and then we saw the rest of it as it walked up to us, real slow like."

"It stared at us and then just sniffed at the boar. We --" Ruffnut's voice cracked, but she paused and then continued as if nothing had happened. "It picked up the boar with its mouth, showing off teeth the size of my knife --" and she held it up to illustrate, "-- before just wandering off. The moment it was gone, the forest seemed to come alive again, with birds and animals and stuff."

Tuffnut looked over to his sister. "That night we didn't sleep. We didn't know whether we'd done enough, so we just lay in our beds, waiting to see if the big black dog would come and eat us after all. We waited up all night, right until the sun came up again. But it never came."

Nobody knew what to say after that. Snotlout shifted uncomfortably, and Fishlegs cleared his throat loudly. Astrid looked like she was on the verge of speaking before changing her mind, and Hiccup found himself uncharacteristically lost for words. In the end, it was Barf and Belch that broke the tension; each head slithered up beside its rider, nudging them and making little rumbles of support.

"Thanks, Belch," Tuffnut said with a sad smile, wrapping an arm around the Zippleback's head. "At least we've got you and Barf to keep away any more black dogs."

"Yeah," Ruffnut said. She scratched Barf's chin and the dragon narrowed its eyes in contentment.

"Well, I'm glad you're both still with us," Hiccup said after a few moments. "And thanks for telling us that story, I guess. It was certainly creepy."

"What about you, Astrid? Have you got any stories?" Fishlegs asked, obviously eager to change the topic. "One about sunbeams and rainbows and unicorns would be good right about now."

Astrid shot him a warning look and Hiccup had to suppress a laugh. Sunbeams and rainbows? Astrid? As if.

"As it happens, there is one story," Astrid said, looking around

the fire pit. "About my uncle, Fearless Finn."

"It's not the one with the Flightmare, is it? Because we all know that one," Snotlout said. Hiccup noticed he'd kicked back, lying beside the fire with his one arm folded under his head.

"No, Snotlout, it's not. But didn't you ever wonder why everyone called him Fearless Finn before the Flightmare?" Astrid shot back. "He didn't give the name to himself, you know."

"I would have," Tuffnut said, his face scrunched up in thought. "If I could think up a cool word beginning with T, at least."

"Troublesome Tuffnut?" Astrid suggested, rolling her eyes at the interruption.

"No, I was thinking something more heroic," Tuffnut said. Then his eyes widened " Terrible Tuffnut! Because I bring Terror to my enemies."

"Or because you're just terrible," Ruffnut said, grinning.

"Guys, come on, let Astrid finish her story," Hiccup said. He was keen to hear it, actually, especially if it was going to be another true story. This was turning out to be a night full of surprises about his friends.

"Thank you, Hiccup," Astrid said, nodding at him. "So, as I was saying, Uncle Finn was fearless long before the Flightmare. One of my favourite stories of his happened when he went on a long sea voyage, nearly a year, chasing a vicious white sea dragon with two heads. It had terrorised Berk's fishing boats for months, and he vowed that he'd hunt it down, no matter how long it took."

Hiccup remembered the attacks on the fishing boats, but only just; he was probably only about 5 or 6 when this had all happened, and he didn't remember anything about a white sea dragon. But he kept his silence.

Fishlegs, however, was less polite. "There are no white sea dragons," he said. "All Tidal class dragons are either blue or green, you know that."

"Fishlegs..." she said threateningly.

"Okay, okay," he said hurriedly, holding his hands up in surrender. "Carry on."

"This wasn't a normal dragon," Astrid explained. "Maybe it wasn't even a dragon at all; it didn't seem to fly, just swim. But it was white, and huge, and would coil itself around the ships, often snapping them in half. So they laid a trap for it " a bunch of our best warriors, led by Finn, sailed off in a fishing boat and pretended to be fishermen.

"Sure enough, the white sea dragon attacked them, coiling itself around the boat and throwing people overboard. They hacked at it and chopped at it, but it was like a snake; it would coil around you and crush you or stop you from being able to fight until it bit your head off." At that point Astrid snapped her jaw shut loudly; Stormfly,

seeing it, did the same, making a sound like a tree branch cracking and causing them all to jump.

"Yeah, just like that," Astrid said, grinning. "Thanks Stormfly." The dragon trilled happily, preening herself as she watched the Vikings around the glowing fire pit. "So it wasn't enough. The ship sunk, and only Uncle Finn survived, paddling back to Berk on a piece of mast, using part of the rudder as an oar. But he vowed to try again â€“ no mere dragon was going to get the better of him."

"So how did he beat it?" Snotlout asked.

Astrid gave him a grin. "Well, the sea dragon would coil around the ship and sink it, right? So Finn had the idea of grounding a ship on some shallow rocks â€“ that way the dragon couldn't get underneath it.

"It almost worked, too; the white sea dragon found them and tried to attack, but couldn't coil around the ship like last time. The only problem was that the ship couldn't move either, and it ended up a stalemate: Finn couldn't really get to the dragon, and the dragon couldn't get to Finn."

Pausing for a moment, Astrid brushed her hair out of her eyes and shrugged. "By this time, Finn was determined to stop the monster. It was like it was personal now, and he wasn't going to stop until he succeeded. So this time he went to Gothi for advice, and she suggested he put sharp spikes and blades all over his armour."

"Clever," Fishlegs said. "If it coiled around him, then it would cut itself to pieces."

"Exactly," Astrid said, really getting into her tale now and leaning forward eagerly. Hiccup found himself just watching her, noting how the warm glow lit up her face, causing her eyes to glitter and her hair to shine, and he watched the smooth, strong movements of her hands as they moved about to illustrate points enthusiastically. It was only when she glanced over at him, making a serpentine motion with one arm, that he realised he'd missed whatever she was saying. Feeling his cheeks warm, Hiccup cleared his throat and tried to concentrate again.

"So after the sea dragon had pulled Finn's boat for miles and miles, it finally got exhausted, and Finn began to reel in the rope, getting closer and closer to it," she was saying. "The dragon turned to fight back, coiling around Finn and the boat, but just as Gothi said, the spiky armour tore it apart, and the dragon released Finn so that he could attack it properly. Leaping onto its back, he raised his axe and brought it crashing down â€“ which she mimed with one chopping hand, "â€“ and cut off one head. The other tried to bite his arm off, but instead Finn managed to jam his axe in its jaw. Pulling out his backup axe, he finished the job and sailed back to Berk, keeping one of the heads as a trophy. And so the white sea dragon never attacked anyone ever again."

"Wonder what type of dragon it must have been," Fishlegs muttered. By this point he was lying back, using one of Meatlug's legs as a pillow, with his hands behind his head. "Some kind of rare Seashocker, maybe. Is the head still around?"

"No," Astrid said. "It got destroyed in a fire." Not surprising, Hiccup thought; after all, until recently, pretty much every house in Berk got burnt down regularly.

"Pity; you can learn a lot from a dragon's skull," Fishlegs said. Meatlug grunted and turned her head to look at him, but Fishlegs just patted her near the ear, saying, "You've got a beautiful bone structure, girl, don't worry."

Hiccup covered a long yawn with one hand and realised that he wasn't the only one looking tired; Snotlout seemed to be asleep, snoring gently, while Tuffnut was dozing against Belch. "Maybe we should get some rest. Hopefully the storm will have blown over by morning and we can just fly back," he said.

"Sounds good to me," Ruffnut said, making herself more comfortable next to Barf.

Looking over at Astrid, he saw her pulling out her satchel to use as a pillow, setting it up between Stormfly and the fire pit. "Well, goodnight then," he said to nobody in particular. Getting stiffly to his feet, he hobbled over to where Toothless was already asleep. Tugging Toothless's tail aside slightly, Hiccup made room for himself and settled down, resting his head on the tail. Away from the fire pit, he was starting to feel the chilly air and the cold seeping through the hard, rock floor, but Toothless was always warm and he snuggled up as best he could against the dragon's side. Without opening his eyes, Toothless moved his front leg up to rest on Hiccup's side, helping to keep him warm. "Thanks bud," he whispered.

He didn't fall asleep immediately, even though he did feel tired; the noise of the storm was still pretty loud, echoing around the cave, and there was still that eerie atmosphere after telling each other spooky stories all night, but Hiccup felt an odd sense of contentment. As miserable as the storm was, it had actually been quite a fun night, and he'd enjoyed the time spent with his friends.

But then he heard a quiet tapping noise, and for a second his breath caught in his throat. "Snotlout, cut it out," he said. "I'm too tired for your pranks."

There was no reply, but the tapping noise did stop. Hiccup felt his eyes grow heavy and he lay there listening to the gentle snoring of the dragons and Vikings, the whistle of the wind, and the pounding of the waves far below them. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Hiccup opened his eyes and jerked upright, hearing some kind of commotion. An icy feeling of dread was creeping down his back, but he couldn't see a thing â€“ the glowing rocks in the fire pit had grown cold and the sun had yet to rise.

"Toothless! Light!"

The Night Fury was already awake and growling, as Hiccup could feel the dragon pushing ahead of him protectively, but it wasn't until Toothless fired a plasma blast into the ceiling of the cave that he got some idea of what was going on.

It took a moment, as the light initially blinded him, but then he saw a pair of... things, things with entirely too many legs for comfort, near Fishlegs.

The next minute or so was absolute havoc. All Hiccup could see were flashes as the dragons shot flames and fireballs around the cave, but he caught glimpses of eyes on the walls, of the twins rushing about with their spears, of Toothless tearing at something with his teeth. He tried to stand, but Toothless shoved him back, not letting him near the chaos.

Almost as soon as it started, the fight appeared to be over. There was a tense silence in the pitch black until Toothless lit up the cavern with a jet of plasma to the fire pit. Hiccup looked around in astonishment, seeing a dozen of the large, multi-legged creatures dotted around the cave, most of them trailing wisps of smoke and missing legs.

"Nightcrawlers," he breathed, trying and failing to suppress a shudder. They must have come from deeper inside the cave, sneaking up on the Vikings and their dragons. One was still twitching feebly until Tuffnut wandered over and speared it.

"Everyone okay?" Hiccup asked, looking around. Toothless was still poised defensively in front of him, blocking part of the view, so he patted the dragon and tried to get past. "It's okay, bud, looks like you scared them off. Let's see what's happened."

"We're okay," Tuffnut replied. "Not sure about Fishlegs."

Toothless relented, taking a few cautious steps deeper into the cave, while Hiccup moved into the centre of the cavern and looked around. The dragons seemed fine, though angry, but Fishlegs lay motionless beside Meatlug, who was crouched protectively over her rider.

"Fishlegs!" Hiccup said, running over. Ruffnut was already there checking him, while Tuffnut stood nearby with spear at the ready. "Is he okay?" Fishlegs looked pale and unnaturally still and Hiccup's breath caught in his throat.

Ruffnut grunted in confusion. "He's breathing, but not much else," she said. She pointed to a pair of puncture wounds in his neck, which were swollen and oozing some kind of unpleasant-smelling dark liquid. "Looks like they bit him."

Hiccup reached out tentatively, though he didn't touch the wound. "Paralysis. Hopefully it'll wear off quickly." He moved over to look into Fishlegs's face and saw that the other Viking's eyes were open. "If you can hear us, Fishlegs, you're gonna be okay, alright? Just take it easy for a bit." He exchanged a worried glance with Ruffnut. "Snotlout really was telling the truth."

Speaking of Snotlout... Hiccup got to his feet and looked around,

feeling a sense of rising panic as he saw no sign of him. "Tuff â€" where's Snotlout?" And then the bottom dropped out of his stomach completely. "And where's Astrid?!"

Toothless turned to look at him and warbled, gesturing deeper into the cave with his head.

"Oh no..." Hiccup couldn't believe this. If the others had been taken, who knows what might happen to them? "Snotlout! ASTRID!" he yelled, knowing it was probably useless. He began running deeper into the shadows but tottered to a halt as a sudden flare lit up the cave fully. Hiccup turned around, shielding his eyes from the brightness, and saw Hookfang aflame. The Monstrous Nightmare let out a bellowing roar, followed by an enraged shriek from Stormfly, and the two dragons rushed past him to the back of the cave, nearly knocking him over. Neither could get any further, however, because the cave seemed to narrow considerably after a short distance; it tapered down to an angle, and at first Hiccup thought it was a dead end, but then he noticed what appeared to be a deep crack in the wall of the cave. Stormfly snarled in frustration and scrabbled at the rock around it, but it was no good â€" both dragons were too big to fit through.

"What about Fishlegs?" Ruffnut said from behind him.

"The dragons will look after him," Hiccup said, looking at them. "Right Meatlug?" Meatlug licked her rider's face, then turned to him and growled in determination. Nothing would get past her, Hiccup was sure. He turned to Hookfang and Stormfly and, holding out his hands to placate them, said, "We'll get them back, guys. Trust me. But right now I need you both to look after Fishlegs for us. Can you do that?"

Stormfly hissed at him, scratching at the floor with one talon and shaking her wings, but then seemed to deflate a moment later, walking back to where the fire pit was. Hookfang took a little longer to obey before lowering his head and extinguishing the flames running over his scaly skin. "It'll be alright," Hiccup said softly, walking up to where Stormfly was fidgeting. He placed a hand on her nose, calming the dragon a little. "I promise, we'll get her back, okay?"

Tuffnut was prodding at one of the dead Nightcrawlers with his spear. "I've got a really bad feeling about this..."

They were just as Snotlout described, Hiccup saw, though more spindly than he'd imagined. Most of them were at least as tall as he was, but that was mostly due to their long, folded legs; their bodies were fairly compact by comparison. They had six legs and two shiny black eyes, and the front pair of legs were longer and had short, sharp claws on the end. Taking a few steps closer, he noticed they were covered in bristles and glistened oddly in the dim light, making him shudder again with revulsion.

"Come on, we've got to help the others," Hiccup urged, tearing himself away from the sight and trying not to think of what might be happening to Astrid and Snotlout. He pulled out his knife and retrieved his Gronckle-iron shield from Toothless's harness, then checked to make sure the twins were ready. "We're going to need some more light, bud. Lead the way." Toothless shot a plasma blast through the narrow gap, barely wide enough for him to fit through even if he

twisted sideways, but it was enough to show that the passage widened again a little on the other side.

The three Vikings followed Toothless through the rocky cleft, all of them on guard. There were no more Nightcrawlers in sight, although there was some sticky residue on the walls. Tuffnut touched it experimentally, seeing how it stuck to his fingers as he pulled them away; the stuff stretched over a foot before finally snapping. "Like really thick snot," he muttered, obviously fascinated.

"Thanks for that analogy, Tuffnut," Hiccup said, rolling his eyes as he followed Toothless. It was uncomfortably quiet, with only the echoes of the storm outside audible. The tunnel they were in wasn't large, maybe six feet wide and with a rocky, uneven floor, and they were walking in single file with Toothless at the front.

Ruffnut pulled her brother away from the wall. "Wonder if they sneeze," Tuffnut added. He wiped the residue off on his tunic as best he could, leaving slimy trails on the fabric.

The ceiling was getting lower and narrower as they went on; after a couple of minutes, Toothless was having to crawl and even the twins had to duck their heads at times to avoid hitting their helmets on the rock. Just as Hiccup wondered how much further they'd be able to get, he felt his foot land on something that definitely wasn't a rock. He froze and looked down, seeing something pale in the afterglow of Toothless's light.

"Bones." Hiccup bent down to pick it up; he was no expert, but he had the sinking feeling that it was probably a human thigh bone. There were a few other bones scattered all around, too; some animal, some tiny ones that were probably from birds, and a couple of bigger ones that might have been parts of dragon wings.

"You know how I said I had a bad feeling about this?" Tuffnut said. "Well, it's getting worse."

Hiccup sighed. The passageway was barely big enough for Toothless now, and he knew that if the Nightcrawlers attacked, there'd be no room to fight back. "Toothless, you're going to have to stay here and let us go in front. We'll go on a bit more and see if it gets any larger again, okay?"

Toothless was clearly not happy, shaking his head with teeth bared in a low growl. He thumped his tail against the ground and shot another fireball down the passageway, lighting it up again. If anything, it just seemed to get narrower, and there seemed to be more shiny trails of web on the walls and floor. Even worse, Hiccup could have sworn he'd seen a few things moving down there.

"There's no choice, bud. You won't fit, and we can't leave Astrid and Snotlout behind," Hiccup said, sheathing his knife and using his free hand to stroke the side of Toothless's head. "We can't leave them. This is the only way."

There was fear in Toothless's eyes, and he gave a low warble of worry.

"I'll be okay," Hiccup said soothingly, scratching his dragon under the chin. "I'll have the twins with me, right?"

Toothless looked at him sceptically, but then he dipped his head in acceptance. There really was no other way: the tunnel was just too small for dragons. It was surprising that even the Nightcrawlers could fit, but Hiccup figured they squeeze into narrow gaps just like normal spiders do.

"How are we going to see without Toothless?" Tuffnut asked, frowning. "Looks pretty dark down there. I'm all for stabbing those things, but if we can't see them, we can't fight them." Indeed, the light from Toothless's last shot was already fading.

Hiccup was stumped for a minute. Tuffnut was right; they couldn't fight those things in the dark, and nor would they be able to find Astrid or Snotlout.

"Pity we can't breathe fire too," Ruffnut said, poking at the bones with one foot.

And then it clicked. "We don't need to if we can get the dragons to do it for us," Hiccup said, collecting a couple of the larger bones. "Grab a few of the long bones and follow me." Turning to Toothless, he said, "Wait here and guard the passageway, Toothless. We'll be back in a few minutes."

Toothless narrowed his eyes and turned back to look deeper into the cave, watching warily. Hiccup headed back up to the cave, his metal foot scrabbling on some of the rocks, clutching the pair of bones in his hand.

"What do we need these for, anyway?" Tuffnut asked.
"Trophies?"

"Clubs?" Ruffnut suggested.

"Light," Hiccup said over his shoulder. "With a bit of help from Hookfang, at least."

It only took them a minute to get back to the main cavern — they hadn't made it far — and Hiccup headed straight to Snotlout's dragon. "Monstrous Nightmare spit burns, remember? It's like a gel." He held out one bone to Hookfang, who looked at him in confusion. "Can you lick this bone for me, Hookfang?"

Obediently, if slightly baffled, the dragon slithered his forked tongue over the end of the bone, then drew back and waited expectantly.

"Do you think he'll set himself on fire?" Ruffnut asked Tuffnut in a conspiratorial tone.

"I heard that," Hiccup said, turning to face them and retrieving a fire starter from his pouch. "And no, I won't. Hopefully, at least." Using the steel and flint, he created some sparks and managed to ignite the gel on the bone, which burned quite brightly.

"Ta-da!"

Tuffnut clapped a few times. "What's your next trick?"

That was a good point, actually. Hiccup looked at Meatlug, still

hovering over the motionless Fishlegs, but shook his head; Gronckle fire was basically molten rock and unlikely to help them much. Then he glanced at Stormfly; Nadder fire was the hottest, and would even melt metal, but there was no way to store it.

Gas from a Hideous Zippelback, on the other hand...

"Here," he said, holding out the other bone to Ruffnut. "Coat the bones with Hookfang's spit. I've got another idea." He went to Astrid's satchel, pulling out her water pouch and pouring the water onto the ground. Then he did the same with Snotlout's bag of supplies, rummaging through a pair of short swords, an unexpected spare pair of trousers, and a loaf of bread to find the water pouch.

Then he put down his torch at a safe distance and took the empty pouches over to Barf. "Can you do me a favour, Barf?" he asked gently, patting the Zippelback on the nose. "I need you to try to blow some of your gas into these pouches." He held out the pouches and illustrated by blowing into one, inflating it with air.

"Yes?"

Barf obligingly shot out a small plume of green gas, causing Hiccup to cough, but he thought at least some of the gas had gone into the pouch. He plugged it with the stopper and then held out the other one, trying not to breathe any more of the noxious green smoke.

"Thanks," he muttered afterwards, stumbling away and feeling slightly dizzy.

"What do you need that for?" Ruffnut asked him, holding several spit-covered bones under one arm.

"Never know when it might come in useful," Hiccup said faintly. He stopped for a moment and rested against the wall, waiting for his head to stop spinning and his stomach to stop churning.

"You get used to the gas in the end," Tuffnut told him. "Well, mostly. Sometimes you just puke everywhere."

After a few deep breaths of clear air, Hiccup began to feel a bit better. Straightening up again, he fastened the pouches to his belt and picked up the torch he'd set down. "Alright, looks like we're ready. Let's go."

Toothless was still where they'd left him, though if it hadn't been for his wide, pale eyes staring alertly down the passageway, he could have been mistaken for a patch of shadow. "We're going on, bud," Hiccup said softly. "Wait here and make sure nothing gets past, okay?"

The Night Fury still didn't look very happy about it. He burbled once, nudging Hiccup further back towards the entrance, but Hiccup was having none of it. "I'm sorry, Toothless, but there's no choice. But we'll be fine" trust me, alright?"

Toothless growled with frustration, but he clearly understood that there wasn't any other option. He stepped back, letting the three Vikings squeeze past.

"Stay alert," Hiccup warned, walking slowly through the tunnel. He

tried to avoid the walls, which were sticky with residue and glittered in the flickering torch light, although the ground wasn't much better; his feet seemed to cling to the uneven surface with every step. He couldn't see that far ahead, but the passageway just seemed to get lower and lower, forcing them all to duck down. If it got too small for them to walk upright, so they had to crawl, he might have to think of a different plan altogether. Fortunately, after a few more yards, the tunnel seemed to open up slightly, getting higher again if not wider, and he breathed easier; it had started to get a little claustrophobic.

After a couple of minutes of cautious walking, he came to a sudden stop, causing Ruffnut to walk into his back.

"What did you stop for?" she complained. "Did your leg come off?"

Without replying, Hiccup just held up his torch higher, revealing the branch in the cave up ahead. Both seemed no bigger than the current passageway, although he could see pale webbing strung across them both a bit further down.

"I've got this," Tuffnut said, pushing past the other two to stand in front. He glanced back with a smug smile, then turned back and pointed with one hand at the left tunnel. "Eeny meeny miny mo, catch a dragon by his toe, if he burns you, let him go, eeny meeny miny mo." He ended with his hand pointed at the right tunnel. "See? It's this way!"

"Well, it's as good a choice as any," Hiccup decided, reluctantly following him into the right-hand tunnel. A few steps later they paused as Tuffnut began to hack away at the webbing with a dagger, although he didn't have much success.

"Try burning it," Ruffnut suggested. "That's what Snotlout said."

To their surprise, the spit-covered bones burnt through the webbing quite easily. "Dragonfire," Hiccup said with a grin. "Works every time."

They carried on, though they only made slow progress thanks to all the webbing in the way. Hiccup suspected that the Nightcrawlers had done it deliberately, trying to block the path after they'd retreated from the dragons. The only good thing was that the passageway had opened up a bit, and a little further along they stumbled into a much larger cavern, almost as big as the entrance cave where they'd taken shelter. Stalactites hung from the ceiling and stalagmites rose from the ground like stone spears, and the whole thing was criss-crossed by thick strands of web. There were a few shallow pools of water around the edges and it had a damp feel to it, unlike the dry tunnel they'd emerged from.

The bad news was that the torchlight was reflected in dozens upon dozens of pairs of eyes, all around them — floor, walls, ceiling, everywhere.

"Er, guys, that bad feeling is back again," Tuffnut said quietly. "Like, really bad."

There was a moment of absolute stillness, the Nightcrawlers seemingly

as shocked as the Vikings, before the writhing, undulating mass of legs and eyes began to pour towards them like a black wave.

"Time to go!" Ruffnut yelled, ducking back into the passageway, Tuffnut right behind her.

Hiccup turned to follow, but then he had a brainwave. Quickly, he pulled one of the gas pouches from his belt, pulled out the stopper, and tossed it into the cavern, trailing a wisp of green smoke. He waved his torch into it, igniting the trail, then followed the twins to a safe distance.

There was a bright flash and a satisfying BOOM as the pouch exploded, and Hiccup turned to see that the Nightcrawlers were in complete disarray; many of them were simply dropping from the ceiling or from the walls and skittering around in circles on the ground. He watched in amazement as the cavern rapidly cleared, the Nightcrawlers disappearing into nooks and crannies and cracks in the wall, or vanishing into the murky depths on the far side of the cave.

"Wow, that worked better than I expected," he admitted. Raising his torch, he saw that only a couple of the creatures had been caught in the blast, but it had obviously scared the rest away. He wondered why; had it been the noise? The heat? The light?

"We better move quickly before they come back," Hiccup said, hurrying across the cavern to what looked like a well-worn passageway on the other side.

Ruffnut flanked him to the right while Tuffnut followed on the left, both of them staring at the walls and ceiling uneasily. "You know they'll probably just be waiting for us again when we come back, right?" she said.

"Leave one lit torch behind, on the ground," Hiccup ordered, pausing to take one look back. There were already dim shapes moving about in the shadows. "At least we'll be able to see them."

Tuffnut dropped one of his and lit a replacement from his sister's torch, and then they all headed into the next tunnel. This one seemed clearer of webbing, as if they'd already broken past the ambush point, and the rocky surfaces seemed to be worn down more, giving it a smoother look. Hiccup felt a foreboding sense of dread building in his chest as they went deeper and deeper, and after they passed a few smaller branches leading off the main passage, all of them empty except for a few dry bones and loose rocks, he suspected that they were approaching the centre of the Nightcrawler nest.

He slowed as the end of the tunnel approached, nothing but deep black void beyond where the walls ended. "Get ready," he muttered, passing his torch to his shield hand and swapping it for his knife.

"What exactly are you going to use that tiny thing on, Hiccup?" Tuffnut asked, hefting his own double-ended spear.

"Vegetables?"

"You would know," Ruffnut shot back. "You've got a turnip for a brain."

"Shut up," Hiccup hissed, lighting his spare bone torch and throwing

it ahead into the cavern, hoping for a better view. The flying torch briefly illuminated a low but broad cavern, strewn with piles of bones and what looked like balls of web – maybe eggs? – before landing in the middle and creating a small circle of light, fighting to keep the shadows at bay. Strangely, the place seemed empty, even though he was certain this was the inner sanctum of the nest. It had a feeling of angry malevolence, almost as if the stone itself was reacting to their unwelcome presence.

"Astrid?" he called in a loud whisper. "Snotlout?" He paused, but there was no reply; the only sound he could hear was the tapping noise of the Nightcrawlers moving quickly, quiet at first but getting louder and louder with each passing moment.

Hiccup felt despair eating away at his resolve. They were pretty much lost in this cave, surrounded by giant spiders that wanted to eat them, and he had no idea where his friends might be. He was sick with worry about Astrid and Snotlout, and felt uneasy and vulnerable without Toothless at his side. It was too much. How on earth would they find them in all these stupid tunnels? How would they get out even if they did? They had minutes at most before the Nightcrawlers reached them, and then they'd have to run.

"Oh come ON!" he screamed, a futile expression of his unbearable frustration and terror. Dropping to his knees, he stared down at the ground and heaved a long, deep sigh. He could sense the twins standing behind him, both clearly at a loss.

But then, amongst the echoes of his shout, he heard it: a muffled moaning sound, somewhere off to his right. Instantly he was on his feet and ploughing through bones, rocks, and webbing to get to its source. Dimly he was aware that the tapping, chattering noise of the Nightcrawlers was getting louder, and there was something else on the edge of his awareness, but he ignored it all. Stumbling forward, he came across a pair of cocoons, one of which was wriggling.

"Astrid? Snotlout?" he yelled. The wriggling cocoon emitted another muffled sound and immediately Hiccup was beside it, cutting away with his knife. He daren't use the torch in case it burnt whoever was trapped inside, but the knife was sturdy and a lot sharper than it looked, and he managed to cut through enough strands to reveal Snotlout's face beneath.

"Snotlout!" he said, relief rushing through him. "Are you okay?"

"Bn btterrrr", Snotlout mumbled. His face didn't seem to want to move properly when he spoke; apparently the paralysis hadn't fully worn off yet.

Turning to the twins, stood nearby, he gestured to Snotlout. "Try to cut him free, quickly." Then he moved over to the unmoving cocoon, heart in his mouth, hoping to the gods that Astrid was okay too. He sliced through the tough cocoon carefully, then realised he was also cutting through strands of blonde hair, stuck to the webbing.

"Astrid!" he murmured, pulling the cocoon round and trying to clear her face. He realised her nose had been more or less left clear, but as he pulled the sticky strands of web from her face, he saw that she was still pale and had her eyes closed. At least she was breathing.

"We need to go, Hiccup, like right now," Tuffnut said, one hand on his shoulder.

Hiccup glanced up and saw imperceptible shapes moving in the shadows, only the occasional glint of eyes revealing their true nature. Turning, he noticed that although Snotlout was still covered in webbing, his arms and legs and head had at least been cut free. The paralysis hadn't worn fully off yet, however, and Snotlout was just flailing around weakly as he tried to move.

Desperately, Hiccup stared into Tuffnut's eyes. "Can you carry him, Tuff?"

Tuffnut just nodded and turned around to heave Snotlout onto one shoulder. "Can't fight at the same time though."

"Leave that to me. Ruff, grab Astrid," Hiccup said, getting to his feet and pulling out the last pouch of Zippleback gas.

With both twins ready, they began to move slowly towards the mouth of the tunnel again, back to back, holding their torches out in a circle of light. Hiccup knew it wouldn't last; the Nightcrawlers were coming, and even if he couldn't see them, he could hear them, feel them, all around.

Just as they neared the exit, there was a sudden skittering as the Nightcrawlers backed off. Hiccup slowed, curious, but then he heard a resounding thud, followed by another and then another and yet another. Something huge loomed out of the shadows ahead of Hiccup, more than twice his height. It was the largest Nightcrawler he'd seen, with a head the size of Hookfang's and legs like black, hairy tree trunks.

"RUN!" he yelled, lobbing the remaining pouch of gas at the beast's eyes. Igniting the gas, he turned to follow the twins, not looking back as he felt the force of the explosion buffet him.

The next few minutes were a shadowy blur as they raced through the tunnels, dodging or burning webs and thrusting their torches into the face of any Nightcrawler that tried to get in their way — they seemed to shy away from the dragonfire. The passageways just seemed to go on and on and for a moment Hiccup was terrified that they'd gone the wrong direction. It was only when he saw a dim glow up ahead that he felt the tightness in his chest relax slightly, and the three of them ran into the big cavern.

The twins ran on ahead while Hiccup paused momentarily to swipe the fallen torch up, moving his shield up his arm so he could wield one in each hand. He scrambled after the others, struggling to keep his footing on the rocky, sticky surface, and waved the torches around to keep the Nightcrawlers back. He figured it was the light that was holding them back; it was probably too bright for them, hurting their eyes. The cavern was teeming with them though, and he really wished he'd brought a third pouch of gas.

Hiccup stumbled as something big and heavy landed on his back, making him drop one of the torches, but he rolled away and waved the remaining one behind him, getting some of the flaming gel onto the Nightcrawler and causing it to skitter away, screeching, as one leg caught fire.

The twins' torches were getting further and further away, so he got back to his feet and chased after them, his heart thumping like a hammer in his chest. He dodged another Nightcrawler, gulping desperate breaths of air into his lungs, and tried to ignore the sharp pain in his left leg as his metal prosthetic thumped into yet another unexpected rock. He was losing ground on the twins and virtually surrounded by Nightcrawlers, and the fear of being left behind threatened to completely overwhelm him.

His panic rose to a crescendo when his prosthetic got snagged on a strand of web strung like a tripwire between two stalagmites, sending him flying forwards to land flat on his face. Hiccup tugged his leg free and rolled onto his back, holding the torch in front of him, and all he could see were eyes and legs and crawling and dark and at that moment he didn't need any Nightcrawler venom to paralyse him.

"TOOTHLESS!" Hiccup screamed instinctively, only realising a moment later that the dragon had no way to help him â€“ he was alone. He was panting raggedly and wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball with his eyes closed, but he knew Toothless would be waiting for him. Toothless wouldn't even be able to leave the island without him. If he didn't get up right now....

With a frantic roar, he waved his remaining torch around, buying himself a little space, and managed to struggle onto one knee. "Ruff! Tuff!" he managed to yell, his voice cracking with fear, as he stumbled forward and bashed another of the creatures with his shield. He couldn't breathe, the air catching in his throat, and he braced himself as he sensed the Nightcrawlers prepare to pounce. But then he gasped in relief as he saw the flickers of torches up ahead â€“ the twins were waiting for him. Seeing the lights in the tunnel, he made another push to catch up to them, using one hand on the ground to steady himself when he nearly slipped again.

"Come on, Hiccup!" Ruffnut shouted back, standing with Tuffnut in the mouth of the passageway. "You can do it!"

Hiccup felt something crash into him from the side, sending him flying against a stalagmite and knocking the air out of him. He closed his eyes for a second, seeing sparkling lights of pain on the insides of his eyelids, then swung wildly with the torch as he forced another breath into his protesting lungs. If only Toothless were here...

The twins had moved further into the cavern to help, still back to back and waving their torches defensively, and Hiccup managed to stagger over to join them. He realised their path was now blocked by more Nightcrawlers and behind him he heard a rapid thump thump thump approaching swiftly. The twins came to a stop, shoulders heaving with the exertion, and put Astrid and Snotlout down before readying their weapons. To his credit, Snotlout managed to struggle unsteadily to his feet, and even Astrid seemed to be moving a little now. Hiccup turned back the way he'd come, still trying to catch his breath, and saw the giant Nightcrawler approach again.

They were trapped.

Hiccup felt himself shaking, legs weak with exhaustion and his shield

arm trembling with fatigue. But more than that, he was quivering with fear; he'd not felt this scared since Toothless had pinned him down and roared into his face, way back when they'd first met. Hiccup felt the blood pound in his head, so loud that he wondered whether it was a drum being sounded somewhere. He'd led them all on this trip; he'd led the twins into the Nightcrawlers' cave; and if he didn't do something quick, he was going to get them all killed.

"If you've got any of those genius ideas of yours, Hiccup, now's the time," Tuffnut said quietly.

There were no genius plans that could save them now, he knew, but in the absence of anything clever to do, there was always the option of doing something stupid and crazy. Hiccup was a Viking, and he had his friends to protect. He let out an incoherent yell of terrified fury and charged right at the giant Nightcrawler, ramming his remaining bone torch into its left eye. The hideous beast reared back, letting out an ear-piercing shriek of pain, and Hiccup saw that Hookfang's spit had managed to set fire to part of the thing's face.

Retaliation was swift though. The thing brought one of its tree trunk limbs crashing down on Hiccup, knocking him flat and stunning him. He saw Ruffnut swipe at it with her torch, setting some of its bristles on fire, but then she was knocked away too. The creature's enormous, monstrous face came down towards him and he raised his shield protectively, but it didn't help; the Nightcrawler nudged it aside with ease, nearly dislocating Hiccup's arm in the process. He got one glimpse of himself reflected, cowering, in the thing's remaining eye, then felt a brief shockwave of pain as something sharp and hot sank into his side, below his ribs.

The Nightcrawler's fangs were nearly the size of his arm, he realised, staring up at the one rising out of his body.

The next thing Hiccup saw was the Nightcrawler rearing back again in pain, Tuffnut's spear sticking out of its head. He gasped in shock, pushing himself backwards towards the twins with his feet, but he was already feeling woozy. Turning, he saw the twins exchanging a look of grim determination.

"Stay down, Hiccup," Ruffnut told him, her knuckles going white as she tightened her grip on her spear. "We got this."

Then a trail of green smoke shot over his head and exploded behind the Nightcrawler, causing a deafening bang and a flash of light that left Hiccup seeing spots. He looked over and saw Fishlegs leaning against the wall of the passageway out of the cavern, torch in one hand, sword in the other. "Go! Go!" he shouted, beckoning them on.

Tuffnut picked up Astrid while Ruffnut wrapped an arm around Snotlout, helping him to stumble forward into the tunnel. "Get Hiccup!" Tuffnut yelled on the way past.

Hiccup managed to roll onto his front and even managed to get to his feet; his limbs felt distant, like they were someone else's, but they still worked. Why didn't he hurt more? But he only managed to take three unsteady steps towards Fishlegs before his good leg gave out.

"Fishlegs!" he cried, losing his balance. He managed to break his fall with one arm, but realised that he could no longer feel it. His legs had gone numb, too.

There was another loud bang and Hiccup felt Fishlegs hoist him up and turn to run, but then his vision started to go dark and everything started to get fuzzy. The last thing he remembered was the sight of the giant Nightcrawler's burning face shrieking down the passageway behind them.

* * *

><p>His hearing came back first. It sounded tinny and distant at first, but gradually became clearer. And then his sense of smell returned, and he smelled salt and burning and blood. Then sensation began to flood back into his body, though he wished to hell it hadn't â€œ every bit of him felt like it was on fire.</p>

"We have to wait," Astrid was saying, her tone suggesting that she was an inch away from burying her axe in someone's skull.

"But for how much longer?" Snotlout shouted back angrily.

There was a pause. "What if Hiccup doesn't wake up?" Fishlegs said into the silence. "His fever seems to be worse, and the venom must have been a lot stronger if it knocked him out."

"He will," Astrid said, but Hiccup could hear a note of desperation in her words. "It's too risky to try to carry him and Toothless back through this storm, you know that. We wait until he's feeling better, or at least go when the weather's calmer."

"And what if those things find a different way in?" That was Ruffnut, he thought, but she sounded different; more serious, more authoritative.

He tried to move, to give some indication that he was awake, but succeeded only in emitting a soft groan.

"Hiccup? Are you awake?" he heard Astrid call. He felt a cool hand on his forehead and then a finger carefully lifted one of his eyelids. It was dark and blurry but he could see her, an expression of deep concern on her face. She was then shoved aside and replaced by Toothless, who liked his face and his chest happily.

This time he managed a kind of choking sound, which he guessed was kind of an improvement except for the waves of pain it sent through his chest.

"I think he is," Tuffnut said, hovering into view; he looked rather worse for wear, but he was smiling. "He's a tough little critter, ain't he."

"Even if he wakes up, can he fly like that? He's got a hole right through him," he heard Snotlout say, anger and worry in his voice. "We have to get out of here now. Hookfang can carry Toothless."

Hiccup sucked in a breath and tried to speak. " 'Crawls...?'" he

managed.

"Nightcrawlers?" Fishlegs said eagerly from nearby. "They're not here, Hiccup. We're safe."

A fuzzy Snotlout came into view, his eyes wide and his dark hair still tangled with webbing. For a moment Hiccup thought Snotlout's eyes were glistening, but he figured it must just be his blurred vision. "Hiccup, we need to get you out of here. Can you fly? Blink once for yes and twice for hell yes." An arm shoved him out of Hiccup's field of view again and Astrid reappeared, with Toothless hovering over her shoulder.

The pain was getting worse as his senses returned, Hiccup knew. His head hurt and he felt nauseous but worst of all were the throbbing shards of agony coming from his side. He realised that his tunic was gone and had been replaced by a tight bandage just below his ribs, and he felt both cold and sweaty. Probably not a good sign, he realised.

"Wa-er?" he asked; his mouth and throat were dry as a bone and he could barely swallow.

"Here," Ruffnut said, holding a water pouch and dribbling a little into his mouth. "Take it easy; it'd be a real pain if you drowned after all the effort we've gone to."

That helped. Experimentally, Hiccup tried clenching his fingers; they seemed to respond, although not very strongly. Tilting his head a little, he looked around; the thin, cold light of pre-dawn was filtering into the cave now, giving just enough light to see by. Hookfang and Barf and Belch were stood near the entrance, where it was still pouring with rain, while Stormfly and Meatlug appeared to be guarding the tunnel deeper into the mountain. Toothless and the other young Vikings were gathered around him.

"Wha happen?" he mumbled. It was hard to concentrate.

"We blocked the Nightcrawlers in," Astrid told him gently. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked very pale, and like Snotlout had webbing tangled in her hair and clothing, but otherwise she seemed intact. "Toothless brought the roof down on them and helped Fishlegs pull you out. But you're hurt."

Hiccup tried to sit up, but that just sent a jagged torrent of pain shooting through his nerves, forcing a tortured gasp out of his lungs. "Yeah," he said after catching his breath, now able to form words better at least. "Flying'll be tricky." Toothless made a concerned trilling sound and peered at him upside down from Hiccup's perspective. "Sorry bud."

"Do we even know how to get back to Berk?" Fishlegs asked. "No point in risking it if we're just going to end up flying in circles anyway."

"Toothless can find the way," Hiccup said. His voice was a little stronger now, though talking still hurt.

At that point there was a warning rumble from Hookfang and a screech from Barf, both looking around outside the cave with their heads out

in the rain. Snotlout and Fishlegs went over to see what the commotion was about, and Fishlegs let out a squeak of alarm.

"Looks like more of those... things are on their way," Snotlout said, peering out of the cave entrance. "They're coming from the outside this time. Hundreds of 'em." He turned back to the others impatiently, a scowl on his face.

"Can we not be here when they arrive? I'd like that very much," Tuffnut said. He looked exhausted to Hiccup and his left arm was covered in blood. Whose blood, he wondered?

They had to leave. The dragons could probably hold them off for a while, but even they couldn't fight off hundreds of giant spiders indefinitely. Hiccup wasn't going to be the one who kept them all here, entombed in this stupid cave on this stupid island. "Tie me to Toothless," Hiccup said firmly, moving a hand to probe his side and wincing as he touched it. "As long as I can control his tail without falling off, we can fly."

"You won't make it," Astrid said bluntly, and he could see the anguish in her eyes. "Hiccup, there's no way you can fly like this."

"I can get us in the air. Toothless can do the rest." He smiled at her. "I can do this, Astrid, and Snotlout's right — we need to get out of here."

She was clearly reluctant, but there wasn't really much choice. Motioning to Ruffnut, the two each grabbed one of Hiccup's arms. "Gently..." she warned, as they pulled him upright.

It hurt a lot, and Hiccup couldn't hold in the scream. Toothless was growling, unsure what to do, and Hiccup began to have second thoughts. "Just get me on his back," he gasped.

They wrapped their arms underneath his and half carried, half dragged him over to Toothless, who flattened himself as much as he could. Ruffnut managed to drape him on the saddle, though it was not exactly his usual riding posture, and Astrid hooked his foot into the tail mechanism.

"They're gonna be here any second," Snotlout said, hopping from foot to foot next to Hookfang.

"Then slow them down," Astrid told him angrily. "Give them something else to worry about."

He didn't need to be told twice, and with a gust of air, Hookfang took off. Moments later they heard a roar and a blast of hot air as the pair tried to delay the Nightcrawlers.

"Tie me down," Hiccup said, panting with the pain. He was lying on his front and the pressure on his wound was making him really dizzy, but he moved his metal foot experimentally and grunted in satisfaction as Toothless's artificial tail responded correctly.

Ruffnut brought over a rope and looped it around him and Toothless a couple of times, tying it tight enough to make Hiccup cry out

again.

"Careful!" Astrid shouted at him. "We don't want him to pass out or suffocate..."

"We don't want him falling off, either," Ruffnut said sharply, but she relaxed the rope slightly anyway.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Hiccup said, hoping he'd believe it himself if he said it enough. It occurred to him that this really wasn't a good idea, but he had no intention of hanging around for those blasted Nightcrawlers to come back. He patted Toothless on the head and said, "Nothing fancy, bud. We get in the air then it's gonna be up to you." Toothless nodded, flexed his wings experimentally, and then ran to the entrance, leaping out into the rain.

At first they just plummeted, racing past the rocky side of the mountain and passing dozens of Nightcrawlers, but Hiccup managed to engage the tail and they flattened out. He locked it in position then glanced back and saw the other dragons spilling out of the cave, following, while Hookfang continued to blast fire at the densest clusters of Nightcrawlers. Some of them fell off the cliff face into the sea, a writhing tangle of legs and flame.

"Time to go, Toothless. Take us home." Hiccup clung on as the dragon wheeled around very slowly, feeling his limbs get weaker and his vision grow fuzzier. "I'm right here, bud," he said, and then he passed out again.

* * *

><p>When Hiccup woke up, it felt less like an awakening from sleep and more like his mind was being dropped back into his body from a great height. He let out a groan of pain and slowly forced open his eyes.</p>

His father's face hovered into view and a hand pressed against his forehead for a second. "Thank the gods you're awake, Hiccup. You had us scared for a while."

"Hi Dad," Hiccup mumbled, his mouth dry and cracked. "I guess we made it back okay then."

"Well, Toothless all but crashed through the roof, but yes," Stoick said, his rumbling voice a reassuring and comforting sound. He held a tankard of water to Hiccup's lips, which he sipped from gratefully.

Then Hiccup felt an insistent nudge at his side and turned to see Toothless staring at him, eyes wide and mouth gaping in a toothless grin. "Hey bud," he said, smiling back. "Sounds like we need to work on your landing skills."

Toothless just chirped happily and licked his face a couple of times, and Hiccup patted him weakly on the nose. It was the best he could manage; his limbs felt like they were made out of lead.

"Is everyone else okay?" he asked his father.

Stoick nodded. "A bit shaken, a few cuts and bruises, but nothing too

serious. You seemed to have got the worst of it, as usual."

Hiccup felt a wave of relief wash over him; at least the others were fine. "Well, at least my remaining limbs are intact this time. That's an improvement, right?" But then just to make sure, he wriggled his fingers and toes. "Just checking," he said, heat rising in his cheeks as his father raised a curious eyebrow. "And Mulch and Bucket made it back?"

"They returned the day after you did," Stoick explained. "Bucket felt the storm coming and they anchored in a cove to wait out the storm."

It was only then that he realised it was dark outside. "Have I been out all day?"

His father didn't reply immediately. "Hiccup, you've been back on Berk for three days," Stoick admitted finally. "You've been in a deep fever. If you'd got back any later..." He left the sentence hanging, apparently unwilling to finish that thought, and that was fine with Hiccup.

"Anyway, get some rest, son," Stoick said, patting him gently on the shoulder and then standing up to go. "You'll feel better in the morning. Just give me a shout if you need anything."

Later, in the dark silence after his father had gone, Hiccup felt scraps of memory slide back into place; flickers of faces – Astrid, Gobber, even the twins – and flashes of himself thrashing around in his bed, convinced he was surrounded by Nightcrawlers. He shuddered, trying to rid his mind of those thoughts again.

His whole body ached and he could barely lift his arms and legs; from the tightness in his chest he knew the bandage around his middle was still there, although the wound in his side felt oddly numb; he wasn't sure whether that was some residual effect of the venom or some kind of poultice from Gothi, but either way he was glad.

And it was a big relief and comfort to have Toothless curled up next to his bed. "Did you miss me, bud?" he asked gently, holding out one hand. The Night Fury nuzzled it, making some burbling noises of contentment, and Hiccup chuckled. "Thanks for getting us back home, Toothless."

It took him quite some time to fall asleep that night, and when he did, it was never for long. It seemed as though whenever he closed his eyes, he'd see Fishlegs frozen on the stone floor, and Astrid and Snotlout wrapped in cocoons, and the twins standing above him, ready to die. He'd hear the tapping noise, and see the vengeful face of the giant Nightcrawler staring down at him, tendrils of smoke curling from its burning eye. And then he'd wake up in the darkness, his side in agony, his bed drenched with sweat.

It was a long, long night.

* * *

><p>Hiccup hadn't deliberately set out to avoid everyone, but he found he just wanted some time to himself, to wrap his head round things, before seeing them. The first day he'd been too weak to do

anything more than totter around his room a little anyway, and he'd asked his father to keep out any visitors. Stoick had given him a look of dubious confusion, but he didn't argue, and he had dutifully turned away Astrid and Gobber when they'd arrived. Hiccup had heard them downstairs, but he just sat against Toothless with his head in his hands, trying to make sense of the chaotic maelstrom of thoughts in his head.<p>

The second day Hiccup felt a little better, so he sneaked out early with Toothless. He didn't quite feel up to a proper flight, but he let Toothless fly him down to the cove, where he smiled as Toothless ran around chasing a squirrel and tried unsuccessfully to catch some fish. They spent most of the day splashing about or dozing in the warm sunlight, enjoying the more favourable change in the weather.

So it wasn't until the third day that Astrid eventually tracked him down. Hiccup had gone down to the forge; Gobber had given him a cheerful nod but said nothing more, apparently understanding his need for a bit of privacy, and let him tinker around in the back of the forge by himself. He was starting to get his strength back â€“ well, what little of it he'd ever had, at any rate â€“ and there were often times in the past when he found smashing red-hot metal with a hammer quite relaxing. If nothing else, it allowed him to work out some of his frustrations on something that couldn't fight back.

Astrid hovered silently in the doorway for a few minutes, watching him work without interruption. Hiccup had noticed that she'd taken to doing that more frequently in recent months, but he didn't mind. He just hammered at a piece of metal, bashing it into shape, and enjoyed the quiet company as he focused on his work. "What are you making?" Astrid asked finally, curiosity apparently getting the better of her.

"A prototype," Hiccup replied, shoving the piece of metal back into the furnace for a minute to heat it back up. "Just testing out some new ideas."

Astrid poked about at the various components on the workbench. "Looks pretty intricate, even for you." She picked up one of the larger parts and said, "Is this some kind of pommel?"

"Half of one." Hiccup wandered over and picked up the other half, showing her how they slotted together. "Most of the other bits will fit inside, assuming I can get it to work."

But Astrid wasn't really paying much attention; she was watching him instead. "Sleeping any better?"

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes. "A little." Returning to the furnace, he pulled out the metal and placed it on the anvil. He still needed to thin it out a bit more, then bend it into shape and flatten it. Sharpening could come later. "You?"

"Same," was all she said.

Hiccup swung the hammer onto the metal a few times, feeling the growing ache in his limbs and painful twinge in his side; he knew he was pushing himself a bit harder than he probably ought to, but he just wanted to be doing something. "How's Tuff's arm?" He'd been

rather distressed to hear that Tuffnut had received a pretty deep slash in his arm at some point during the fight.

"You could ask him yourself, you know, if you weren't hiding out all the time."

He stopped hammering and sighed; he deserved the rebuke. "How did you find me, anyway?"

Astrid snorted with amusement. "There was a Night Fury standing guard outside; it wasn't hard. I'm surprised Toothless was even willing to let you out of his sight." She was silent for a couple of minutes, watching him work with the strip of metal. "The others are asking about you, you know." There was a pause in which he was sure she was rolling her eyes before she added, "Even Snotlout is worried."

"I'll come down to the academy later this afternoon," he said, resting his arm and catching his breath. He was sure the hammer had never been this heavy before. "I just need a bit more time, okay?"

Astrid gripped Hiccup's shoulder with one hand and spun him around gently to face her. With her other hand, Astrid tipped his chin up to make him look at her. "What are you hiding from, Hiccup?"

"Is this another of those famous Astrid pep talks?" he said, forcing a grin.

She smiled back, but there was a stern glint in her eyes. "It'll be another of those famous Astrid smackdowns unless you tell me what's got into you."

Hiccup shook off her hand and paced about a bit, nervous energy making him unable to stand still. "It's just..." But he couldn't explain it. How could he? How could he admit just how terrified he'd been of being left behind, alone, in that dark nest? How he'd nearly got them all killed â€“ how he'd nearly lost Astrid? How every night he woke up panting, drenched in sweat, after staring again at his own reflection in the eye of that thing?

He owed his friends a massive debt of gratitude for saving him, for standing by him when he fell, and he just didn't know how to tell them that. Especially since they'd only been in that situation in the first place because of him.

Astrid's expression softened. "You know it's not your fault, right?"

"I know." Hiccup finally met her gaze and smiled briefly. "But next time we take shelter in a cave, remind me to make sure it's empty first, alright?"

"Deal." She headed for the exit, but paused at the door to ask, "Promise you'll come to the academy this afternoon?"

"Yeah, I promise," he said, nodding. "Can't slack off any longer, after all." And he knew he would have to face them at some point, no matter how hard he tried to put it off.

Hiccup resumed hammering the metal, wincing every time he tried to

raise his arm too high. It didn't bother him too much, though, and he did feel a bit more cheerful after Astrid's visit. Maybe Astrid was right; she usually was, after all.

* * *

><p>True to his promise, Hiccup found himself reluctantly flying down to the academy later that day. He could smell something burning and heard some bickering, and he felt a spontaneous smile spread across his face. "Sounds like things are back to normal already, Toothless," he said as they flew into the arena.</p>

"Hey, Hiccup's back!" Tuffnut shouted, sounding oddly pleased. He was sprinting across the arena, being chased by his sister. Ruffnut, Hiccup noticed, was covered from head to toe in fishguts and was waving a mace over her head in a most threatening manner.

"Finally..." Snotlout said loudly, turning to see Hiccup dismount. He was stood next to Hookfang, holding a flaming throwing axe in one hand with more axes was on the ground next to him. Hiccup figured he'd been getting Hookfang to coat the axes in spit and then using the stack of destroyed barrels â€“ the source of the burning smell â€“ as target practice. "'Bout time you bothered to turn up for work." But there was a smile on his face nonetheless.

Hiccup glanced around, taking in the smoking remains of the barrels, scorch marks on the walls, a scattered pile of rotten-smelling fish, and a long red streak of something he sincerely hoped was not blood leading to one of the dragon doors. "I'm gone for less than one week," he said in exasperation, "and this place looks worse than a battleground."

Astrid jogged over, brushing her hair out of her eyes with a frustrated sigh. "I don't know how you manage to keep them all in line," she said, glaring at Snotlout. "It's been crazy."

Fishlegs emerged from behind Meatlug, where he'd apparently been taking cover from Snotlout's target practice. "How are you feeling, Hiccup?"

"Much better, thank you," Hiccup said, giving him a genuine smile.

Tuffnut and Ruffnut came over, and Hiccup spotted what looked like a new dent in the side of Tuffnut's helmet. Ruffnut, a guilty expression on her face, hid the mace behind her back. "Wanna see my new scar?" Tuffnut asked, proudly rolling up his sleeve to show a bloody scab several inches long across his upper arm. A few crude stitches were visible and Hiccup's heart fell.

"Tuffnut, you need to stop taking off your bandage â€“ it'll get infected," Fishlegs scolded him.

"Where's the fun in having a battlescar if you can't show it off?" Tuffnut shot back. But then he caught sight of Hiccup's stricken expression and said, more quietly. "It's okay, it doesn't hurt too much, except when Ruff smacks it. But it's cool, right?"

Hiccup opened his mouth but no words emerged. He just stared at the

wound and found himself momentarily back in that dark cave, on the rocky floor, with the twins standing beside him. "I'm sorry, Tuff," he managed in the end, stammering slightly and rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "It's my fault. I should have come up with a better plan, one that didn't nearly get us all killed."

Ruffnut prodded him in the stomach with her mace. "Don't be such a yak-brain, Hiccup," she said. "Your plan worked, didn't it?"

"I dunno, could have worked a bit better," Snotlout said, swaggering over; Hookfang, looming behind him, gave him a thwack to the helmet with one clawed wing. "Ow, what was that for, Hookfang?"

A ghost of a smile began to return to Hiccup's face. "Good to know at least Hookfang has my back," he said. But then he looked around them all, particularly the twins and Fishlegs, and held each of their gazes for a moment. "It's good to know you all have my back. It means a lot."

Astrid gave him a gentle punch in the shoulder. "As if there was ever any doubt," she said, forced cheerfulness in her voice. "I'm just glad we all listened to Snotlout for once and didn't just wait in that cave for the storm to be over."

Hiccup felt Toothless nudging up against his side and smiled down at him, blinking away the sudden tears that were prickling in his eyes. "So," he said, clearing his throat and looking up again at the others with a wry grin. "Does anybody want to explain to me why the academy looks like a herd of wild dragons had an all-night party in it?"

"It was only a small party," Tuffnut said, shuffling his feet. "That's okay, right?"

Hiccup laughed for the first time in days. "Yes, Tuff. It's okay."

And it really was, Hiccup realised; yes, they'd all been through something terrible, but they'd faced their fears and made it through together. They were a team and no matter what, they would always be there for each other.

"So," he said, smiling. "Who's up for a bit of dragon racing? Last one back has to clean up the arena..."

End
file.